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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PINR BO
SUBJECT: DIVIDED THEY CAMPAIGN IN THE FALL

REF: MINSK 153

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Calls for a unified slate of opposition candidates in fall parliamentary elections failed to dissuade an opposition leader from organizing an alternate slate of candidates on a so-called European list. So far candidates from the main coalition slate, with a few exceptions, chose not to actively prepare for elections, and some fear defections to the European list driven by financial considerations. The surfeit of potential opposition candidates does not denote any more faith that the GOB will conduct free and fair elections. Unfortunately, multiple opposition slates could obscure regime fraud and prevent a meaningful post-election protest. End summary.

Unified Opposition List to Face Off Against European List

¶2. (C) In spite of the United Democratic Forces' (UDF) standing invitation to other opposition leaders to run for parliament on its unified list (reftel), Nikolay Statkevich told A/DCM that he would help lead an alternate so-called European list. He said he rejected the UDF's offer because the coalition would not settle upon European integration as its overarching message in the fall parliamentary campaign. United Civic Party (UCP) Deputy Chair Yaroslav Romanchuk, however, told A/Pol/Econ Chief that the UDF would not confirm its main election themes until April.

¶3. (C) Statkevich said his European list already had 41 potential candidates (for the 110 constituencies) from Gomel, Grodno and Vitebsk oblasts. Romanchuk said Statkevich let it be known that the European list would have USD 400,000 in international support for its candidates.

UDF Candidate Activity Minimal So Far

¶4. (C) Sergey Alfer, a former UCP Deputy Chair, complained that few UDF candidates were active so far. UCP Chair Anatoliy Lebedko and Belarusian Party of Communists Head Sergey Kalyakin began assembling their campaign teams, according to Alfer. Also, in Gomel oblast the UDF organized a recall campaign against a sitting MP. Alfer presented three factors holding back candidates. First, most lack resources. Second, those with day jobs fear suffering repression from the regime before the election season has even officially begun. Finally, most candidates take their cues from the party leaders, whose preparations

still remain behind the scenes.

Will the European List Show Candidates the Money?

¶5. (C) Alfer explained that further delay in finalizing the approved campaign themes candidates should use would weaken training for candidates that should begin in May. He did not see funding for the campaign as the limiting factor.

Instead, the need for at least 100 volunteers in a district to run a viable campaign meant that the UDF could only run to win in 20 constituencies.

¶6. (C) Romanchuk, approved by the UDF to run in Grodno oblast, said he would soon distribute flyers. Other candidates still had no money, however, and he feared some UDF candidates would defect to the European list due to the promise of funding.

Contempt for Lukashenko Still a Uniting Factor

¶7. (C) No one expects the regime to allow free or fair elections. Lebedko clarified that if Lukashenko decides to allow a token opposition presence into parliament a few regional election commissions will receive instructions to that effect. Statkevich noted Lukashenko would rig elections through abuse of early voting procedures and falsified protocols, and opined that the dictator would use opposition participation to legitimize the vote.

Comment: Running to Win, or Going through the Motions?

¶8. (C) We wonder why Statkevich wants to campaign if he believes Lukashenko will use participation to legitimize his illegal rule. The fact that Statkevich was more outspoken in Strasbourg than in Belarus suggests the answer may lie in impressing foreign donors. Unfortunately, splits in the Belarusian opposition tend to mirror splits in the international community's approach to assistance. That European social democratic parties insist on directing funds to sister parties bearing the same name ensures the continued existence of several weak Belarusian social democratic parties.

¶9. (C) We agree fraud will mar the elections. Unfortunately, if multiple opposition candidates run in one district, voters can be forgiven for believing that fraud did not determine the outcome. That will make the UDF and other opposition figures vulnerable to regime propaganda that they are just losers looking for foreign grant money. On the other hand, making a convincing argument that the regime stole the election in at least a few districts would make it harder on the regime and those arguing for a conciliatory approach toward Lukashenko.

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